Report of Proceedings
JOUHS Colloquium 2011
'"I know my place": the interaction of urban space and social hierarchies in history'
Trinity College, 14 May 2011.

On the 14 May 2011 the *Journal of the Oxford University History Society* held its second international colloquium, this time seeking to investigate investigating the relationship between the concept of space and the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies.[1] This was in response to the surge of recent writing on the 'spatial turn', and sought to investigate how this (for historians) new concept can, and should, be used to illuminate our understanding of the past. Two keynote speakers and nine panellists addressed a wide range of topics and approaches from seventeenth-century Naples to squatters in 1970s West Berlin.

The day was kicked off by the first keynote address from Dr. Bob Harris (Worcester College, University of Oxford), who spoke on the topic 'Enlightenment, Order, and the Spatial Transformation of the Georgian Scottish Townscape'. In an interesting and wide-ranging paper Dr. Harris used material from his current research project 'Scottish Towns and Urban Society in the Enlightenment, c. 1745-1820'[2] to challenge received opinion that Enlightenment ideas drove the extensive process of improvement that went on in so many Scottish towns during that period. He suggested instead that 'Enlightenment' was a means of describing the improvement of Scottish towns after the event, not an adequate explanation of why and how that improvement was brought about. Using examples ranging from Dundee to Kirkcudbright, and from the construction of bridges to the importance of side-pavements and the gable-ended building Dr. Harris reconstructed an eighteenth-century understanding of space that was based around mobility and circulation and a process of gradual and belated anglification. He stressed that Enlightenment was just one force in urban society, and not the most important one, suggesting that the needs of industry, commerce and religion were uppermost in contemporaries' minds. He concluded by urging historians to trace the complex interplay of public and private interests that drove urban improvement.

The three panels of the day were arranged in chronological order, starting with the early modern period. First up was Dr. Jorge Fernández-Santos Ortiz-Iribas (Universitat Jaume I de Castelló, Spain) with his paper on 'From Masaniello to Macchia: The Urban Agenda of the Neapolitan Legal Establishment (1647-1701)'. He discussed how a legal elite made up of 'middle-class' intellectuals adopted a method of seeing the city of Naples based on a rigorous criticism of sources and a fascination with the antique. This approach to the city celebrated the street as the key image, and marginalized the ecclesiastical and aristocratic landmarks of Naples. Furthermore, this Neapolitan legal elite had a clear understanding of Naples as independent, rather than as part of the Spanish or Austrian empires – they continued to dominate the city and spread their own vision of Naples irrespective of which European power was in fact ruling.

The second paper came from Dr. David Marsh (Birkbeck College, London), who spoke on 'Class and space in early modern London seen through its parks, common fields and churchyards'. He examined how the elites of the London vestries sought to exercise control over the green spaces of the city, notably the park at Moor Fields, the churchyards of the various parishes and the Royal Parks. What emerged was a picture of elites trying to restrict access to these spaces by the use of fences, locks and keys, and by selling the rights to build on land. The poor of the city frequently managed to subvert these attempts, sometimes by hanging their washing from the trees in Moor Fields, or by entering the Royal Parks after dark.

The final paper of this panel was Samantha Walton (University of Edinburgh) speaking on

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1   Details of the first colloquium can be found at
    http://sites.google.com/site/jouhsinfo/issue7specialissueforinternetexplorer.
2   For details of this project see http://www.history.ox.ac.uk/research/projects/Scottish_Towns.htm.

'The Architecture of *La Serenissima*: Space and Power in the *Palazzo Ducale*, Venice'. She sought to use the concept of space to illuminate the means by which the rulers of Venice, notably the Council of Ten, constructed an image of open politics, while also maintaining a strict regime of secrecy and controlled knowledge. Thus the ground floor of the *Palazzo Ducale* was open to the public, but the real site of political power, the first and second floors, was strictly off limits. Furthermore, the Council of Ten could move throughout the Palace by means of a series of secret passages which connected their chambers to the torture rooms and the state's secret archives. She argued that the space of these secret passageways symbolized the Council's attempt to know and control all aspects of the city's life.

After lunch we had the second keynote address, this time from Dr. William Whyte (St. John's College, University of Oxford) . His address, entitled 'The Final Frontier? Some problems with space?', sought to warned historians against adopting an uncritical adoption of the concept of space. He emphasised that historians need to fully understand what they mean when they use the term 'space', and warned against simply taking these concepts 'off the shelf' without adequately historicizing them. In order to demonstrate the dangers he examined the example of student protest in English universities during the 1960s. Dr. Whyte suggested that while these protests seemed to illustrate many of the aspects of the 'spatial turn' (contested space, space as text, literal battles over space) we should exercise caution in using the concept of space either to explain causation or to understand the students' experiences. He pointed to the events at the London School of Economics where the movement was primarily an ideological one, with students protesting the appointment of Dr. Walter Adams as Director of the LSE because of his involvement in the College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. He argued that space only became important when students were denied access to certain areas of the LSE, and therefore that space might have been epiphenomenal - at the very least it was less important to some than it was to others. Dr Whyte also noted that pointed to the fact that the key radical thinkers the student activists were reading (Marx, Durkheim, Trotsky, Mao) had little to say about space. All of this, he argued, suggested that ideas about space could not have driven student activities simply because they did not think in spatial terms. Dr. Whyte stressed that he was not suggesting historians abandon the concept of space, but he did encourage them to take a more critical approach to space as well as a deeper consideration of the notion of 'place'. He argued that a fuller understanding of the particularities of place rather than the abstractions and universalities of space would allow historians to better understand the use and construction of the built environment in the past. He ended by stressing that space was not a type of text and that approaching it as such was misleading, and urged historians not to rely so heavily on the spatial ideas of literary theorists but instead to engage with geographers who have worked on the idea of place. This paper was an interesting and useful corrective to the sometimes over-enthusiastic and uncritical adoption of new theoretical concepts, though one was left wondering whether his criticisms were particularly appropriate for the consideration of other areas in history more suitable for spatial analysis, such as the role spatial narratives played in individuals' understandings of their urban environments.

The second panel, on the (very) long eighteenth century got underway with Dr. Malcolm Dick (University of Birmingham) and his paper on 'Location, place and identity: Jewish spaces of residence, worship and death in Birmingham, c. 1780-1880'. Dr. Dick examined how thinking about space can enhance our understanding of minority communities. In this particular case the development of the Jewish community of Birmingham could be traced in its attempts to create, maintain and define its spaces of worship, death and residence with the town. Central to this process were the synagogues. The building in the 1850s of the substantial and impressive synagogue at Singers Hill represented the growing confidence of the Birmingham's Jewish population. They were no longer confined to the poor area known as the Froggery - instead the community's spiritual and physical centre was situated in a respectable area of the centre of the town, overlooking the newly-built New Street Station.

The second paper came from Elizabeth Cook (College of William and Mary) on the topic of '"By Work Done for Me": Building Culture and Client Relationships in eighteenth-century Williamsburg'. She examined the history of the development of a new colonial capital and the social and economic relationships between groups of 'gentlemen' and 'craftsmen'. These two groups were regulated by different social codes. The gentlemen had an overwhelming concern with 'liberality' - a freedom from material necessity that allowed them to undertake leadership roles in the community. The craftsmen had to demonstrate their 'competence' in order to secure the commissions they required to make a living. Competence was signified by three main elements: property ownership, craft knowledge and deference. The paper stressed the importance of considering how social relationships and building practices interacted and combined in the creation of social hierarchy and pointed to material culture as a crucial source of evidence for social historians.

The interaction of social hierarchies was also at the heart of Oskar Cox Jensen's (Christ Church College, University of Oxford) paper, '"Strategies of condescension": taming John Bull through the inversion of spaces, 1809-14'. He sought to explain how elites in 1809 and 1814 managed to control the poor despite not being easily able to enter the spaces of the poor (taverns etc.) He suggested that the English elites used the celebration of two jubilees (in 1809 and 1814) held in public places to inculcate ideas of loyalism in, and to express their power over, the poor. Mr Cox Jensen argued that the elites one way the elites did this was by 'strategies of condescension', that is by subverting the normal social hierarchy in order to reinforce them – notably by serving the poor at public feasts in Great Yarmouth and elsewhere.

The final panel covered the end of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The first paper on '"What separates man from the animals?" Or "Why do Southside girls go out with Northside boys?": Dublin's social hierarchy, from empire to independence', was an amusing and thought provoking discussion from Dr. Ciarán Wallace (Trinity College, Dublin) on the spatial division between the Nationalist, lower-middle-class centre of Dublin and the Unionist, elite townships to the south of the city. What was of great interest was the way in which political issues, specifically the Unionist/Nationalist conflict, meant that the townships were not absorbed under a larger municipal body covering all of 'greater Dublin', as happened elsewhere in United Kingdom. This political reality led to the establishment of a spatial social division, which continued even after independence.

Peter Mitchell (University of Edinburgh) then provided a fascinating insight the spatial politics of the squatter movement in 1970s West Berlin ('Establishing urban counter-spaces: The squatter movement in West Berlin'). He argued that the large radical population of Berlin reacted to the modernist building programme, so that a radical movement that had been primarily concerned with the politics of class became increasingly concerned with the politics of space. The squatters turned apartment blocks into communal living spaces and painted large murals on their sides as methods of opposition to the West German government. These 'counter-spaces' were key to the tactics of the radical movement as they acted as places in which they organised themselves and from where they were able to spread their message through press conferences.

The final paper of the day was delivered by Ben Clarke (University of North Carolina) and was entitled '"Only a Tap-Room Man": Social Hierarchies and the Public Houses'. He discussed Mass Observation's *The Pub and the People: a Worktown Study* (1943) and concluded that the division between the two most common rooms in pubs (the tap room and the saloon) reflected a complicated social divide. It was not a simple division between middle and working classes, or between upper and lower working classes. Instead people could and did move between the socially and spatially differentiated rooms depending on their age, gender and purpose. For example, it was common for couples to split up on entering the pub, with the woman entering the saloon bar and the man the tap room; with the man then often joining the woman in the saloon bar at the end of the evening for a final drink. Mr. Clarke stressed that the methods of distinction represented in these

two separate rooms often broke down, particularly when people went on holiday and engaged in a form of carnivalesque licensed transgression.

A number of common themes emerged during the day. The first was the issue of spatial thinking – to what extent did individuals in the past think about space, and what language did they use when 'thinking spatially'? Dr. Whyte questioned whether we, as historians, can use the concept of space when the people we are studying did not. Many of the papers pointed to the ways in which issues of space were key to peoples' thinking, especially when it came to narrativising landscapes. Another theme was that of conflict over space. Nearly every paper touched on this topic, and it reinforced the idea of space as a site in which social and other conflicts could be acted out. A final issue that was raised was the extent to which space could be active – can space dictate individuals' actions, or is it something which limits and shapes human activity? In general the papers shied away from a form of spatial determinism, suggesting instead that the second notion was more plausible and useful. Indeed, the colloquium as a whole reflected a cautious endorsement of the utility of the concept of space for historians. Space it seems is here to stay as a tool of historical analysis and, on the basis of the papers given to this colloquium and the discussion they engendered, this seems like a good thing.

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